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ABSTRACT

This paper on early college entrance for gifted high-school students considers the advantages of early college entrance, the willingness of colleges and universities to accept early entrants, special programs developed to assist early entrants, and potential difficulties with early entrance. Guidelines are presented for maximizing the chances of success for students considering early entrance to college. These guidelines include such suggestions as having the student attend a college-sponsored academic summer program, avoid excessive publicity about the early entrance decision, develop good personal organizational skills, and evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of commuting versus living on campus. The paper concludes that early entrance to college has been a successful experience for many students for many years. (12 references) (JDD)

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Early College Entrance for Gifted High-School Students: Experiences and Guidelines

Paper presented at the 1992 Annual Meeting of the

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Early College Entrance for Gifted High School Students: Experiences and Guidelines

Teenagers with high levels of academic aptitude or potential have needs that require different educational options than those that are offered in most heterogeneously grouped classrooms. High-aptitude students thrive in classes where they are grouped with other high-ability students and where the teachers provide differentiated instruction for them (Kulik, & Kulik, 1991). There is disturbing evidence that the failure to find and participate in high-level and accelerated courses reduces the chances of success in pursuing advanced mathematics and science careers (Benbow and Arjmand, 1990).

We have known for many years that talented youth need, and are capable of understanding, advanced academic content (Daurio, 1979). They require curricular experiences that are presented to them at a fast pace and classes that match their ability to comprehend and integrate material. A variety of educational options which address these needs are available to these students: pull-out classes, homogeneously grouped classes such as sections of mathematics in elementary school or gifted English in the junior or senior high, special seminars, academic programs offered by universities or colleges on Saturdays or in the summer, accelerated academic classes, and early college entrance.

The Appropriateness of Early College Entrance

What advantages are there to condensing four years of high school into three or leaving high school one or more years before graduation to enter college early? Colleges and universities offer challenging course work which allows more in-depth learning of abstract and conceptual material, analysis of advanced topics, and higher-level discussions than most high schools provide. The structure of college provides opportunities for early entrants to be independent in their work and study and have freedom of movement and action during large portions of the day.

Early entrants have an advantage over students who enter college at the regular time in that they have gained one or more years for exploration of multiple or hybrid majors and careers, personal interests, or creative applications of their knowledge. For instance, early entrance might allow a student to obtain both a medical and a legal degree or combine intensive majors such as engineering and physics in the same time most students take to complete a single degree. Early entrance provides more years for productive, innovative contributions by the accelerant. The opportunity and time for study in foreign countries is another advantage gained by some early entrants (Stanley, 1983).

Parents and students considering early college entrance may wonder, will colleges and universities be open to the application of a student who has left high school early? Astin (1978) reported that early college entrance accounted for 3.4 percent of all freshmen in American colleges and Universities that year. Fluitt and Strickland (1984) found that 15% of colleges and universities actively recruited qualified early entrants, and 87% of them admitted students full-time prior to high school graduation. They found that most schools admitted students who were high-school juniors, but a number of institutions would permit earlier admission. Sayler (1990) found over 200 successful young entrants at Purdue University at a time when the university had no formal program to recruit or provide services for early entrants. American universities and colleges are open to early entrance applications, but institutions that accept early entrants do not always advertise this option. Information about the possibility of early entrance at a particular institution may not be easy to find in the general promotional literature supplied by colleges and universities or in the standard guides (e.g., The Right College; The College Blue Book) for college selection (Sayler, 1990).

Special Programs

In addition to accepting individual early entrants, some schools have organized programs specifically for groups of students to enter college early. These programs offer more structure than is found when a student enters college early on her or his own. They provide a peer group of early entrants, and thereby make the transition to college easier for some students. Participants have the best of high school and college: the challenge of college courses, the support of specially trained professionals, and same-age social and intellectual peer groups. Some organized early entrance programs are: the Texas Academy of Mathematics and Science (Sayler & Lupkowski, 1992; Stanley, 1991), the Clarkson School of Clarkson University (Kelly, 1989), the Program for the Exceptionally Gifted at Mary Baldwin College (Cohn, 1987), and the University of Washington Early Entrance Program (Robinson, 1985).

Much of the organization and structure of the Texas Academy of Mathematics and Science is typical of these programs. TAMS is a two-year, early-admissions program for Texas students who are particularly talented

in science and mathematics (Sayler & Lupkowski, 1992). Participants take their last two years of high school and first two years of college concurrently in residence on the campus of the University of North Texas. Participants are not given enriched high-school courses; instead they take college courses taught by regular college faculty.

Over three hundred students have entered college early through TAMS during the first three years of the program. These students are helped in their adjustment to college by living together in a single residence hall where they develop a support system of peers who are the same age and who have similar abilities. TAMS students are college students and are treated as such except that they are provided with a smaller residential staff-to-student ratio (25 students per Resident Assistant versus 50 regular college students per Resident Assistant) and are more restricted in their daily conduct.

TAMS students may participate in all university extracurricular activities and organizations except fraternities, sororities, and varsity athletics. The Academy also provides special recreational programs including dances, tours, athletics, outdoor activities, and talent shows. The staff is specially trained to assist the early entrants in coping with homesickness and adjusting to university life.

Potential Difficulties with Early Entrance

Some early entrants will experience difficulties meeting other students their age; others will find they become a "floor mascot" for older students; and still others will feel frustrated by difficulties attending certain social gatherings and parties (Sayler, 1990). There are also high-school experiences early entrants may miss such as having senior privileges or attending a prom. The extracurricular activities and social experiences of high school, for some students, outweigh the opportunities and experiences gained from early college entrance. Early entrants with athletic interests may also find that they are barred from playing college sports because of their age or if they do compete in non-varsity athletics, they may not be as successful as if they had stayed in high school. They may also find that they are not as competitive in extracurricular activities such as music or student government because they have had fewer years to develop those skills.

Early entrants who are unable or unwilling to live a distance from home might be forced to initially attend a college or university close by and live at home. There is also a possibility that early entrants will not be accepted into more selective universities, whereas they might have been accepted had they graduated prior to application.

When early entrants finish their undergraduate courses and are ready to begin graduate school, they may find discrimination because of their age. Early entrants might not be accepted into some graduate, medical, or law schools; and they may find it difficult to obtain a job in certain fields. Finally, early entrants who have not spent some time thinking about career possibilities may find they have been compelled to make career choices too early. They may be forced to make choices without enough academic and other life experiences to make good decisions.

Guidelines

The experiences of many early college entrants and much research have shown that most early entrants to college are successful. As noted earlier, some individuals, though, do encounter difficulties. What can be done to maximize the chances of success for those students who are considering early entrance to college? The following suggestions are based on guidelines proposed by Sayler (in press).

1. Prospective early entrants should contact the admission office of the institutions they are considering attending, explain their circumstances, and request information on the university's policies regarding early entrance. This should be done as early as possible; junior high or early high school is not too soon to begin thinking about and exploring the possibilities and requirements.
2. Students should exhaust the challenging opportunities available in their school system. They should be taking, as early as feasible, Advanced Placement courses, honors courses, advanced-level course work, and college courses on a part-time basis or in summers.
3. Potential early entrants should consider attending academic summer programs before they leave high school at intellectually demanding universities such as Purdue, Duke, Johns Hopkins, or Northwestern. For several weeks, participants learn to manage their time and energy, take responsibility for personal hygiene and laundry, and set appropriate hours for sleeping and studying.
4. Students contemplating early entrance to college must have a sincere desire to accelerate. They must do so with the knowledge of what they will miss in high school: prom, leadership

positions, athletic superiority, etc. They should be excited by the prospect of early entrance and all the things it entails: challenging classes, close association with mental peers, more freedom, early career possibilities, opportunities to participate in cutting-edge research, etc.

5. Early entrants should consider attending special programs (e.g., the Texas Academy of Mathematics and Science at the University of North Texas or Early Entrance Program at the University of Washington) where a group of young students attend college together. The advantages of special programs for early entrants include having age-peers and a support network.

6. A student who enters college at a very young age, or without clear career goals, might be better off choosing a state university that offers a wide range of courses rather than a very specific program at a major college or university. A top-ranked university that offers courses appropriate only for students with excellent high school preparation might be too difficult for some very early entrants. Early entrants should select universities and colleges with strong programs and departments in their areas of interest and which offer courses appropriate for a well-rounded basic education.

7. Early entrants will need to decide whether to commute or live on campus. The advantages of living at home include continued contact with old friends and having family to help with the laundry, housekeeping, food, and doing homework. The costs of college will be less if the early entrant lives at home. Some of the advantages of living on campus include more involvement in the campus community and its activities, and access to university facilities and personnel (labs, libraries, study and help sessions, and professors). The disadvantages of commuting include inability to drive for very young students, limited contact with college peers, and difficulty in using the university facilities as often as necessary. Possible disadvantages of living on campus include: adjustment to being away from home for long periods of time, roommate troubles, dating situations, and pressure to participate in potentially risky social activities. A compromise plan would begin with the student living at home, commuting to a nearby college campus, and then in a year or two moving to a campus full time.

8. Early entrants should have aptitude and achievement measures (i.e., SAT-M, SAT-V, ACT-Science) at least as high as the average for the freshmen class in general and for freshmen in the intended major field (i.e., electrical engineering, chemistry, mathematics) of the institutions to which they are applying.

9. Students considering early entrance should look at their personal organizational skills. They will need to have good time-management skills or they need to develop them. Early admission to college will probably not effect a change in the behaviors of a student who is unmotivated or has turned off to school. Early entrants should be prepared to take more responsibility for their lives. They may be unaware of the amount of reading, the level of detail and analysis expected, and the need for long periods (3-5 or more hours daily) of study outside of regular class time (Sayler, 1990). Asking questions of their professors, attending help sessions, forming study groups, and not associating Bs or Cs in their first courses with incompetence or failure are all skills and attitudes that will make the transition to college more successful. Additionally, practicing good personal hygiene, keeping a regular laundry schedule, and maintaining a reasonably clean living area will help the student be comfortable and be accepted by his or her college peers.

10. Students who attend dual-credit programs such as TAMS or who start college early and transfer to another institution after several years should consider applying to the new school as freshmen with advanced standing. This enables them to apply for more merit-related scholarship funds, as the majority of these funds are earmarked for freshmen. After a semester or so on the new campus, the student can apply for standing as an upperclassman and complete early graduation.

11. Finally, early entrants are advised to avoid excessive publicity about their decision. An overly public profile may bring unreasonable expectations from others, and place the student in uncomfortable situations. Most early entrants will be perceived as regular college students unless they advertise their precocity.

Summary and Conclusion

Early entrance to college provides academically talented students with a viable educational choice. Despite the fears of social or emotional problems, most students electing to enter college early can expect to experience achievement, make friends and date, participate in extracurricular events and organizations, and take part in normal social activities and development. For most early entrants, the period of adjustment to college is short and feelings of success are common.

College provides challenging classes, close association with high-ability students and faculty, more freedom, research opportunities, and an early start on one or more career paths. Early entrance is not a panacea for gifted students with problems in regular high schools. Students who have not learned to organize themselves and their study may not succeed in college.

Academically, early entrance affords accelerants an intellectual challenge and stimulating environment: it is an excellent option for students with high-academic ability. For individuals who have exhausted the demanding courses available in their high schools, the intellectual rigor of college is exciting. Bright, motivated, and organized early entrants find they are successful in college courses. Early entrance to college has been a successful experience for many students for many years, as the literature demonstrates. Most individuals who fit the pattern suggested in this paper will find the experience beneficial academically, socially, and emotionally.

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